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Requiem for a Traitor: A Spy's Lonely Loyalty To Old, Betrayed Ideal

By Roy Medvedev

MOSCOW — Several weeks ago some friends of Donald Maclean gathered at a private apartment in Moscow to honor his memory on the ninth day after his death, as is the Russian custom. Among them were several scholars and specialists on international relations, two former members of the Cominern and myself. Maclean's circle of friends in Moscow was not large, but those who knew him best respected him and considered him a sincere person whose fate was not only unusual, but tragic.

Only a few of the people who worked with Donald knew the details of his biography. The short obituary in Izvestia paid tribute to him as a scholar, the author of a number of studies of England's foreign policy, a doctor of science and a prominent member of the Institute of World Economics and International Relations.

But that does not explain why leading newspapers in England and the United States devoted major articles to the death of a scholar who was never very well known in the U.S.S.R.

A Scotsman, Donald Maclean was born to a wealthy, aristocratic family, and dozens of influential relatives congratulated his father (who later became a member of the British Cabinet) on the birth of a son. But when, at the age of 70, Donald Maclean died in Moscow in total isolation, none of his relatives had been with him during illness and none was present at his funeral.

For Britain he was a spy, a traitor to his country and class, condemned in absentia to 30 years of imprisonment. For the U.S.S.R., he was one of the best spies who ever worked for Soviet intelligence.

For 20 years the Soviet media have been singing the praises of Soviet spies and members of the secret police. They have made a hero of Richard Sorge, one of the first to predict the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, who was hanged in Tokyo in July 1944. Long articles appeared about Donald Maclean's former friend Kim Philby, who had also occupied posts in Britain's diplomatic service. But no articles appeared about Maclean, nor is it likely he would have agreed to any such publicity, though entire books had been published in Britain about the Maclean-Philby affair.

I happened to meet Maclean in the late 1960s. I had written a large manuscript about Stalin [later published in the West under the title "Let History Judge"] which I was showing to individual historians, old Bolsheviks and other writers in exchange for their comments and to gather facts and testimony to add to a future book. One of my acquaintances asked for permission to show the manuscript to Mark Petrovich Frazer; Maclean was going by that name in Moscow.

My acquaintance told me a little about Maclean's life. His childhood had been typical for boys of his circle. In the 1930s, he began to study at Cambridge, a university accessible only to a few at that time but rife with political passions even so. Britain still possessed her empire, and the ruling class was not yet contemplating independence for the colonies. World War I was still a fresh memory, as was the Depression of 1929-33.

Many saw a way out in radicalism or fascism. Still others, including some members of the intelligentsia and the aristocracy, read Marx and Lenin with hope. To them it was Soviet Russia that had provided "a ray of hope in the kingdom of darkness" by overthrowing capitalism.

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Donald Maclean's personal crisis came during the Spanish Civil War. At that time a Communist Party cell was active in aristocratic Cambridge. Young Donald requested permission to join the party, but he was asked to wait. Some time later he was asked to meet "a certain person," introduced to him as a senior member of the Comintern [the Communist International]. "You can do more good for the communist movement and its standard bearer, the Soviet Union, by serving our common cause in secret, and not by joining the party," the man told Donald. "It would be best for you to put some distance between yourself and the communists and make a career for yourself like other young men of your background."

Donald agreed with this logic. He was still very young and only vaguely realized the price he would have to pay for his choice. He sincerely believed in socialism and did not want to continue the life of a well-heeled aristocrat. Within his own society he was a "dissident," but English society was tolerant to dissent and he would not have been faced with imprisonment even if he had openly come forward with a gospel of Marxism.

Now, however, Donald had become an agent of a foreign power, a spy, and English society — like any other society — could not forgive him this. True, he had not been bribed, but had been recruited through appeals to his convictions. He received not a single cent for his work as a spy, but that did not justify his actions in the eyes of British society.

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